

Health & wellbeing

The future's bright

Abigail Payne threw away her back brace after trying alternative treatment for scoliosis. Health editor Barry Nelson speaks to the aspiring model

ASPIRING model Abigail Payne from Darlington was just 12 years old when she was given what she thought was a life sentence of pain. Abigail was very fit and active and had dreams of a career on the catwalk, until she was diagnosed with a spinal condition known as scoliosis.

The Payne family were devastated and distraught at the prospect of their daughter needing major spinal fusion surgery.

"My daughter has been photogenic from a very young age. She loved attention and could never get enough of the camera. That's why it was so heart-breaking to see her confidence disappear. It was like her personality changed overnight," says her mother, Jane.

Scoliosis causes the spine to curve sideways. The condition affects more than four per cent of the population and, if left untreated, can lead to fatal heart and lung problems.

In around 90 per cent of cases, scoliosis corrects itself as the child grows. Most of the remaining cases can be successfully treated by wearing a brace, but in around three per cent of cases surgery is recommended. This involves metal rods being inserted either side of the spine, before the spine is fused solid.

After a series of meetings with the local NHS hospital consultant Abigail was told her scoliosis was progressing fast and that she would need to be fitted with a rigid back brace immediately. Regular X-rays would then be taken to monitor Abigail's condition before deciding whether to operate.

"I can remember feeling totally alone when they said I needed a back brace," says Abigail. "I was so worried and frightened about what the other children at school were going to say. I also knew that my dreams of becoming a top model were now just that – a dream."

After the initial fitting Abigail wore her brace for 23 hours a day. The only time she took it off was to have a bath or shower. The brace was plastic and in a corset shape. Abigail often complained of pain while she was wearing it, but she was so desperate to avoid spinal fusion surgery that she put up with it.

However, as the months passed Abigail's back deteriorated. Her spine was twisting at a

rapid pace and the hump on her back was becoming more prominent. She was also suffering from excruciating pain.

In summer 2010, Abigail and her mother were told that her spine was now so contorted, that if she did not have her spine fused, it was likely that she would be bent double by the time she turned 16. "But I was desperate for Abigail to avoid surgery," says Jane.

It was at this point that they came across Scoliosis SOS via the internet.

Founded and run by Erika Maude, who has scoliosis herself, the clinic opened more than four years ago and has brought relief to hundreds of sufferers. It offers a combination of non-surgical treatments, including a special form of physiotherapy, together known as ScolioGold.

"When my mum showed me the details of the clinic, I thought it was amazing. My dreams of being a model were long gone, but I still wanted to avoid having my spine fused as I knew the risks involved. I also knew that I would lose my flexibility forever – not something any teenage girl wants to accept," says Abigail.

After a free consultation with one of the clinic's consultants, Abigail booked in for a four-week course of treatment at the Scoliosis SOS clinic in Suffolk.

Once at the clinic, her initial apprehension quickly evaporated and by the end of the first week, she was starting to enjoy treatment.

"Seeing Abigail smile again was the best feeling in the world. She had lost her passion for life and every day she was at the clinic I could see it coming back," says Jane. "It was also lovely to see her surrounded by other girls who were going through the same thing – they really supported each other."

Abigail, now 13, has noticed a fantastic improvement in her posture and physical appearance and she is now completely pain free. She has learned how to hold her body and how to look after her back. And she has also noticed a dramatic increase in her lung capacity.

The teenager is now looking forward to her future and has started sending off photographs to modelling agencies.

"I am so excited. I feel so good about myself now and I am starting to get my confidence back," says Abigail.

"I would recommend any parent to look into alternatives and to not necessarily trust the first opinion you get," Jane says.

A ScolioGold therapist said: "Abigail has reduced her lateral deviation, reduced her ribcage rotation and rib hump and has dramatically improved her posture. I wish her every success with her modelling career."

■ A full, four-week course of intensive treatment, which includes accommodation, costs £2,950. To contact Scoliosis SOS, ring 01394-389670 or visit scoliosisSOS.com



Pain free: Teenager Abigail Payne is now looking forward to growing up

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Improved: Abigail before and after